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# **Resisting within the neoliberalising academy: reflections on doing transformative doctoral research**

## **Abstract**

This paper reflects on the authors' experiences in doing transformative research in two countries of South East Europe - Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina, during their doctoral studies abroad – United Kingdom and Finland. Within the neoliberal context of academia which celebrates 'success stories', research committed to change and action may not always be welcomed and may even be considered as a pathway to 'failure'. Reflecting on this type of 'failure' and 'opportunity' through our personal stories, we debate how we can resist neoliberalisation in academia from within and promote an anti-oppressive and empowering place of hope and change.

## **Introduction**

This is a reflective paper, based upon our experiences as international doctoral students at universities in the United Kingdom and Finland, while doing transformative research in our home countries - Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Transformative research is an emancipatory approach to research that focuses on the structural power relations in institutions and communities that can influence the achievement of social justice and anti-oppressive action (Mertens, 2009). Author 1's story reflects on the academic labour market in Greece and various events that occurred during her research, whilst author 2's story reflects on how transformative research is socially constructed as a 'failed' project within an academic learning context. Both authors have a background in social work, in which the values of social justice and social change are central. Therefore, we wanted to better understand the dynamics of socially constructed divisions and oppression in higher education through our doctoral research. Conceptualisations on 'failure' vary in literature; but for the purpose of this paper, we adopted McArthur's (2014) approach - grounded in critical theory and pedagogy where failure is understood "in terms of that which does not meet the expected or accepted norms" (p.174), and means "more than simply an absence of success; instead, failure needs to be understood as an important pedagogical phase, particularly when engaging with complex knowledge in critical ways" (p.177).

The paper is structured to present our stories, and while they are different in terms of scope and social context, they both challenge the notion of 'failure' in academia under neoliberal norms and present opportunities for resistance and transformation from a junior scholars' perspective. Author 1, explored the role of social work education in Greece on students' adherence to the anti-oppressive values of their profession, based on a case study methodology. Author 2, conducted action research with social work graduates (between 2011-2016) in BiH about the challenges experienced after graduation, and possibilities for bottom-up changes.

The neoliberal context of academia has been discussed by various disciplines including geography (i.e. Dowling, 2008; Klocker, 2012; Turner & Peters, 2014; Mountz et al., 2015) as well as social work (i.e. Garrett, 2010; Wilson and Campbell, 2013; Preston & Aslett, 2014; Morley, 2016) but these discussions are mostly based on the UK and US context. Therefore, this paper seeks to broaden the discussion by adding the social work perspective from countries that less discussion is represented.

### ***Sofia's' story***

My PhD research (2010-2015) explored social work education and anti-oppressive practice in Greece, at a time of national socio-economic crisis and great austerity. My research interests into social work education and anti-oppressive action were influenced by my personal experience of the crisis and the rise of inequalities in Greece as well as my teaching and working experiences as a contract academic staff member. Influenced by critical social theory perspectives for social work practice and education (i.e. Dominelli, 1994; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Cocker & Hafford-Letchfield, 2014) I wanted to understand the content and context of social work education, in which the (anti-) oppressive positions of professionals-in-the-making are constructed. More specifically, the discussions with students in and outside of the classroom about oppression, the informal chats with colleagues, our (educators' and students') experiences of resisting neoliberal welfare and educational policies, and the experience of teaching a more clinical and technical ('how to') curriculum, made me wonder about the impact of social work education on students' critical consciousness and anti-oppressive action.

During my PhD, I was working in academia as a contract adjunct lecturer. The neoliberal agenda for low cost education, well before the crisis in Greece,<sup>1</sup> resulted in Universities having few permanent academics, and many contract staff members in precarious conditions. The divisions between permanent and contract academics have been discussed in higher education, social work and geography literature (Giroux, 2010; Turner & Peters, 2014; Preston & Aslett, 2014), and I experienced first-hand the exploitation of having temporary contracts (one-semester) with limited national insurance, being significantly underpaid or receiving delayed payments (once every three or even six months). In order to survive financially, along with my full time contract with the University I had to undertake another part time job as well as undertaking my PhD on a part time basis.

Significant challenges occurred during data collection, in March 2013, when the so-called Athena Plan<sup>2</sup> (law 4115/13) included the unexpected abolition of the Social Work Department, in which I was employed as well as conducting my PhD research. This announcement created a local crisis. It was a time when students, colleagues and me were upset about what had happened and also worried about the

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<sup>1</sup> Greece ranked near the bottom of the EU countries for the proportion of GDP invested in higher education over time (*The Guardian*, 20/06/2013).

<sup>2</sup> The Athena Plan introduced closing down or merging of numerous Departments across Higher Education Institutions in Greece by the Ministry.

implications for studies/work. These circumstances were unforeseen and intense emotions were expressed such as fear, anxiety and disappointment. An initiative by students and academics along with professionals organised a number of actions to challenge the Ministry's decision. The University premises were occupied for several weeks along with numerous demonstrations and protests by students and academics across the country, who demanded the Plan be withdrawn (Dedotsi, Young & Broadhurst, 2016; Dedotsi & Young, 2019). Despite our struggle against the neoliberal Athena Plan, our students eventually were 'violently attacked by thugs who allegedly attempted to suppress the protest' (Ioakimidis, Cruz Santos & Martinez - Herrero, 2014, p. 295; Teloni, 2013). The Department was nevertheless abolished at that time<sup>3</sup> and our 'failure' to challenge and withdraw the Ministry's decision, hit both us and our students hard. Neoliberal academia seemed as strong as ever and every resistance was felt to be in vain.

At a personal and more practical level, not only did I have to seek for a new job but also there were a number of implications in my research. I had to speed up the research process in order to not lose my data and the process of hearing, analysing and presenting my informants' stories was something that I found personally challenging and painful given the circumstances. Most importantly, I had to be reflexive and critical, acknowledging my subjectivity involving not only dual roles (researcher – educator and researcher – colleague) but also shared experiences with my informants and the power and contextual differentials within (Klocker, 2012), as a continuous deliberate effort.

Towards the end of my PhD, further political dilemmas occurred. The research findings revealed the unjust and oppressive context (policies, reforms, labour conditions) and content (technical and not critical curriculum) of social work education, within which the (anti-) oppressive positions of students are constructed<sup>4</sup>, and I was fearful in case they could be used to oversimplify and justify retrospectively the abolition of the Department and/or blame students and colleagues for their practice. In addition, I faced the dilemma of whether I should present specific data as they could be used to prosecute students in subsequent legal proceedings for their occupations of the academic premises. These were intense challenges and dilemmas and there were no straightforward solutions. Discussion with my supervisor about the potential harm to the research informants was crucial in deciding which findings I would use and how I would write them up in my thesis and subsequent publications. This reflexive, critical and open account of what I was doing, how and why, was welcomed by the thesis assessors who applauded the academic legitimacy of my work.

However, the findings of my research have not been always welcomed. In some academic conferences, the findings of my research have been questioned as 'not legitimate' or 'dangerous' reflecting social work education in Greece, whilst in the peer-review process there has been one reviewer who kept asking new major

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<sup>3</sup> Following a number of reforms in higher education across Greece, this Department of Social Work was re-opened in September 2017.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the findings of this research please see Dedotsi, Young & Broadhurst (2016) and Dedotsi & Young (2019).

revisions in a paper of mine, openly disagreeing with some of the content as well as questioning the evidence and credibility of my research, despite the fact that other reviewers and journal editors were supportive. Of course, this is a small example, but highlights wider concerns of how transformative research can be blocked from a number of stakeholders, constructing the researcher and the research findings as the sources of the problem (Noffke, 2009; Humphrey, 2012; Klocker, 2012).

Considering the above, I admit that I have wondered several times whether resistance and transformative research within neoliberal academia, is a lost cause or not. Through harsh circumstances, I discovered that resistance to neoliberalism and being involved in social action is not easy - oppressive institutions/policies do not change overnight. However, this notion of 'failure' – to achieve change - can serve as a useful tool of neoliberal academia to isolate, alienate and consequently, weaken any potential resistance (Wilson & Campbell, 2013; Preston & Aslett, 2014). I found hope in the solidarity among people and communities through the years of crisis in Greece as well as in the power of resistance as a common struggle with colleagues and students and not as an isolated individual fight. I found inspiration in the insights of Paulo Freire and more specifically in the concept of critical consciousness: "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 35). I realised the opportunity to resist and transform neoliberal academia into a place of hope and empowerment through multiple ways. I have taken an activist pedagogy approach in my teaching by prioritizing anti-oppressive content and considering the classroom as a site of social transformation (Morley, 2008). Together with my students we try to resist the 'depoliticisation' of learning (Giroux, 2010) via engaging into a dialogical process of deconstructing the oppressive institutions, contexts and self, revealing how neoliberal agendas for education and welfare can oppress and how transformative policies can empower people. In addition, the aftermath of our struggle against Athena plan, made us (students and colleagues) more involved with wider social movements for denouncing policy cuts, austerity and violation of human rights. Nevertheless, the most important impact of resisting the 'failure' agenda of silence in neoliberal academia, is the reminder that we are not neutral, neither experts, nor innocent subjects. This awareness has helped me to be open and critical about my power and subjectivity, as well as learning from the voices and reality of my students and the people I work with.

### ***Gorana's story***

I am at the final stage of writing my doctoral thesis about the challenges after graduation experienced by social workers in BiH, and possibilities for bottom-up change.

In BiH the development of university social work programs started in 2000, following the post-war and post-socialist transitions of former Yugoslavia (Hessle & Zaviršek, 2005). Demands for neoliberal transformation, shortage of social workers with a university degree, international actors' involvement in social work education as well as the ubiquity of ethnic divisions within the country, created a favourable context for establishing more social work schools (Hessle & Zaviršek, 2005; Miković & Habul,

2007; Bašić, 2013; Maglajlić & Selimović, 2014). Yet, despite the more opportunities to study social work in BiH today, far too little attention has been paid to the challenges upon graduation, especially using transformative study approaches.

I have experienced various challenges while conducting action research (AR) in BiH - a complex context of colonial history and present, recent political (ethnic) conflict, and neoliberal reforms<sup>5</sup>. However, my focus in this paper is to reflect on the very challenge of doing AR as a doctoral student in social work, and the discouragement and reservations I experienced in interaction with the international social work scholars regarding my choice of doing AR dissertation.

In recounting my experience as a doctoral student who decided to immerse herself within a non-linear and actively engaged research project, I embrace Klocker's (2012) words of encouragement for action-oriented doctoral students. In her view, the researcher's own awareness when recounting individual experiences of doing AR plays important role in challenging or feeding "discouraging discourses" and "despondent literature" about coexistence between AR approaches and PhDs. Therefore, it is important to document both – challenges experienced by action-oriented researchers *and* positive accounts where forecasted warnings, battles and obstacles did not occur (Klocker, 2012).

In my case, submission of the AR proposal and securing the doctoral research funding were successful. In addition, my supervisor was already experienced in conducting and supervising AR dissertations. I considered myself privileged, whereas other postgraduate students face struggles regarding action research "because action research is not mainstream research in universities, [and] it is often necessary to defend it as a legitimate form of research" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p.6).

Although doctoral education in social work in Finland has a strong and long-lasting research-background (Forsberg, Kuronen & Ritala-Koskinen, 2019), AR was not mainstream research at my home university. During the first two years of my doctoral studies, I met one PhD student in social work at my university who was part of a broader AR project. In addition, there were no university courses and training about AR to attend in English. In the four years of my doctoral studies, I had the opportunity to participate in only one course that promotes activist scholarship – *Grassroots: Theorizing Activism by Abo Academy*. The point I want to emphasise is that there were no institutional obstacles to do AR but at the same time, institutional conditions to thrive with an AR dissertation were missing - an organized AR

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<sup>5</sup> The endless post-conflict and post-socialist "transition" (Štiks & Horvat, 2012) brought to most of its citizens "general impoverishment, de-industrialization, mass unemployment and living under a post-democratic governance of divisive and corrupt elites" (Riding, 2018, p.16). In Jansen's (2014) view, for already two decades the ruling caste managed to successfully delegitimize and demobilise any political unrest concerning non-identitarian inequalities and demands for redistribution. Instead, issues of unemployment, poverty and the privatisation process are ignored or postponed, while identitarian/statehood questions are used as justification for status quo. Jansen (2014, p.90) termed this as "Meantime", which is reproduced by "endless loop of depoliticization". Yet, recent years witnessed forms of resistance centered to social justice in BiH (Jansen, 2014). My personal lived experience in such contexts played a significant role in my research interests and position.

community inside academia and courses addressing action researchers' needs were absent.

Since the earliest stages of my PhD, I took every opportunity to present my research in front of various academic audiences (doctoral seminars/courses and international conferences); however, I realised that I had to explain, justify or sometimes even defend my use of an AR approach. Encounters in these academic spaces evoked a range of reactions, including feelings of confusion, frustration, isolation, anger and discouragement as well as enthusiasm, excitement and appreciation for "*doing hard and important work*" as some scholars said in their feedback.

The advice 'not to do AR' at the doctoral level was given as a 'friendly advice' as well as open reservations. Such advice has mostly come from non-action researchers, but some were made by researchers under the umbrella of AR approaches too. Commonly cited concerns suggested the separation of political action and activism from research, but mostly considered the risk of 'failing' to complete my PhD within the expected time frame and risking my dissertation completion with a report of 'failed' action. These suggestions clearly illustrate the notion of failure as something "which does not meet the expected or accepted norms" (McArthur, 2014, p.174). I understand that some of these concerns were raised in my best interest to have a 'successful start' of an academic career. However, I argue that such career-centered views, risk-avoiding and/or fear of failure-driven advice, can actually diminish critical pedagogy in doctoral education.

I found it contradictory that some scholars whilst they expressed their appreciation for my enthusiasm, passion and engagement with AR even acknowledged its potential at a post-doctoral level, they nonetheless dismissed AR as too risky and potentially set to fail. One social work scholar openly said: "*your supervisor is wrong about doing action research.*" Another said that I already have "*a nice, elegant piece of ethnographic research*", and gave me a "*reason for not doing*" AR. In this scholar's view it was too risky (to do AR) without knowing if I would successfully bring the change, which would not look good in my dissertation assessment. However, failure as Klocker (2015, p.18) points out "is a realistic prospect" for academics engaged in action research. Similarly, Herr & Anderson (2015) pointed out that there are no guarantees of successful change; an action researcher can only commit to change efforts.

Consideration of re-designing my study's methodology away from AR may seemed "enough" to obtain the doctoral degree, but leaving out the action-orientation felt like giving up on the opportunity of actively engaging in thinking about what is to be done about existing situation, and try to do something about it (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Herr & Anderson's (2015) book 'The Action Research Dissertation' was very helpful in dealing with the received comments. According to them "the final write-up of the AR dissertation does not automatically mean that there will be a "successful" change effort to document with a happy ending – although it might. Rather, our goal as researchers is the *documentation* of working to understand and initiate change in the contexts being studied, including how the change process was obstructed or not seen as viable despite persistent efforts. These "*failed*" attempts are important to

document in terms of increasing our understanding of the complexity of the change process” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, pp. 161-162). Undertaking change-oriented research is an open-ended endeavour without any guarantees that it will result in the envisioned change. It is important that we, as members of academia, evidence with our research the struggles and strategies we employ in challenging and altering structures and conditions under neoliberalisation. In this way, failure can provide a means to *resist* the dominant neoliberal ideology that pervades the higher education system and demands “success” at all costs (Halberstam, 2011).

The concerns about doing AR dissertation came from experienced scholars who knew the rules of the academic ‘game’. The troubling part is that today’s academia is dominated by the neoliberal ideology and schemes present in limiting conditions, such as time pressure and limited funding to produce scientific research (Greenwood, 2012; Mountz et al., 2015; Boden et al., 2017). Therefore, the raised concerns could be understood in Bourdieu’s “feel for the game” governed by neoliberalism considerations (Garrett, 2010, p. 351), as well as from the “phronetic social science” perspective, acceptance of agenda “what works” over “what’s right” that better connects social research and social action in promoting positive change (Schram, 2016, p.1).

Without counterbalancing the “what works” agenda with “change research” (Schram, 2016), then perhaps, higher education institutions risk limiting their capacity in becoming “spaces for the nourishment of knowledge-driven social change” (Boden et al., 2017, p.10) despite the constant production of new scientific knowledge. For me, doing AR dissertation was a transformative experience (McArthur, 2014), and I see it as a celebration of committed to change effort, revealing both the challenges and opportunities for resistance to current neoliberal flow within academia. As Potts & Brown (2005, p. 261) point out, knowledge is political; it can be means of oppression or resistance in anti-oppressive researcher’s understanding, and as such “research processes can also become acts of resistance”. The dissertation assessment for me is now approaching and with it, learning process continues, while considerations of failure and success are only temporal (McArthur, 2014).

Klocker (2012, p. 150) captured the discouraging discourse in the literature that “pits participation action research and PhDs against each other, creating a sense that only the bravest students would dare to mash the two”. What motivated me to share my story was not to “encourage” more students to pursue AR for their PhD, because it is not a matter of individual courage; instead, it’s about demanding institutional changes from our universities, struggling together in challenging neoliberal conditions next to positivist paradigms and seeking possibilities for pursuing transformative research too. Eventually, more postgraduate students might embrace AR approach in their dissertations.

## **Conclusions**

Our stories of transformative research within the neoliberalising academy, are neither of ‘success’, nor of ‘failure. Instead, they are stories of resistance; examples



of the many academics out there struggling for a more just academia and society, and evidence of the commitment to phronetic inquiry (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In times that academia reproduces oppressive power relations, our concluding thoughts are inspired by Bowles & Gintis (1976) who conceptualised education as the laboratory of rebellion. We argue that such revolutionary change in academia lies in opportunities to do transformative research and action, and documenting and joining the wider voices and struggles against neoliberalism across the globe. It is this vision of academia that we want to share in this reflective paper, and invite the readers to undertake an activist stance to social research by not just pursuing the generation of scientific knowledge but also with the desire to interrupt the status quo (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Under this conceptualisation, the expected or accepted neoliberal norms (McArthur, 2014) will be seen as a failed project itself compared to a more empowering narrative to transform academia into an anti-oppressive place of hope and change.

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